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Review of the implementation of the recommendations and decisions adopted by the General Assembly at its tenth special session: Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report to the General Assembly on the work of the twenty-ninth session of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, held in New York from 10 to 13 June 1997, is submitted pursuant to Assembly resolution 38/183 O of 20 December 1983. The meeting was chaired, upon my request, by Ambassador Mitsuro Donowaki of Japan.

2. I met with the Board on 10 June and requested the members to explore during the session the new security and disarmament challenges for the twenty-first century and the evolving role of the United Nations. At the time the Board was meeting, I was in the process of formulating my proposal for reform of the United Nations, including the disarmament sector of the Organization (see A/51/950, paras. 120-126). I thus requested the Board to provide me with its views on this matter.

3. Below are some of the salient points of the Board's deliberations on those items.

A. Reorganization of the United Nations disarmament sector

4. The Board made four recommendations on reorganization of the disarmament sector of the Secretariat:

(a) All the members of the Board except for one concluded that the responsibilities of the disarmament and arms control sector of the United Nations would increase, and thus supported strengthening its staff and resources. They pointed specifically to additional tasks and duties in the area of practical disarmament in the conventional field, the implementation of arms agreements regarding weapons of mass destruction, the facilitating of regional agreements and confidence-building measures and the present and future tasks associated with the implementation of international agreements on anti-personnel landmines;

(b) Members agreed that the chief representative for disarmament affairs should be at either the Under-Secretary-General or Assistant Secretary-General level;

(c) Most members felt that the chief representative in disarmament affairs should report directly to the Secretary-General on most matters;

(d) Most members, but not all, agreed that it might be better to base the section of the Secretariat dealing with

* A/52/150 and Corr.1.

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disarmament in New York, while maintaining close liaison with disarmament activities at Geneva.

5. Some members of the Board felt that a sweeping reorganization of United Nations disarmament activities might have to wait until the convening of the fourth special session of the General Assembly on disarmament. For that reason, some of them reiterated the need to convene the special session as soon as possible. Some other Board members reiterated their proposal to convene a broader-based United Nations-sponsored international conference on peace, disarmament and international security.

B. New security and disarmament challenges for the twenty-first century and the role of the United Nations

6. Against the backdrop of the end of the cold war and the diminished possibility of global nuclear confrontation, the Board discussed the security consequences of economic globalization, the lessening of the importance of national boundaries and the increase in intra-State conflict and illicit trafficking in small arms and other criminal activities. It also noted that the actors on the international scene were diversifying and were no longer limited to States. The most serious security threat representing that trend in recent years was the increase in intra-State conflicts and terrorist activities.

C. Conventional arms

7. The Board sought to identify possible roles for the United Nations with respect to conventional weapons. The changes in the security situation as described above require what are called "practical" disarmament measures, including preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. Four issues were discussed under that heading.

1. Register of Conventional Arms

8. The Board considered that the Register of Conventional Arms, now in its fifth year of operation, was significantly contributing to transparency in conventional armaments and building confidence among nations. Unlike similar international reporting systems, it noted, the Register had recorded data on transfers of conventional weapons from nearly 100 Member States every year. It also noted that the Group of Governmental Experts currently reviewing the operation of the Register was considering ways and means to consolidate, strengthen and improve it. The Board foresaw an increasing role in the coming years for the United Nations Secretariat in the maintenance and operation of the Register.

2. Small arms

9. The Board was convinced that the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons in some regions of the world posed a threat to regional and global security. For that reason, it looked forward to reviewing the conclusions and recommendations of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, established by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/70 B, of 12 December 1995, which was finalizing its report to the Assembly at its fifty-second session.

10. The Board noted the view expressed by the Chairman of the Panel, a member of the Advisory Board and its Chairman that in order to reduce the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of such weapons, the root causes of conflict, including poverty, political disputes, injustice and suppression of human rights needed to be addressed; that democratic processes would have to be promoted; and that the capability of Governments to guarantee security to its citizens would have to be enhanced.

11. For those reasons, the Board considered that the coordinated inter-agency effort of the United Nations in West Africa, involving the Department of Political Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization appeared to be the most appropriate and effective approach. A lesson learned in that region, the Board noted, was that solutions to the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms would have to be region-specific. Conscious of the reluctance among donor countries to provide development assistance for the maintenance of internal security ("security-first" approach), the Board recognized that efforts would have to be made to raise the awareness of the donor community to the need for such assistance and to promote cooperation among all concerned.

3. Disarmament, good governance and peace-building in West Africa

12. The Board heard a report from one of its members on the integrated United Nations inter-agency exercise, started in Mali in 1995, which had been extended to other parts of West Africa. (That project grew out of the United Nations Advisory Mission on the control and collection of light weapons in the Saharo-Sahelian subregion, which began in August 1994.) The Board took note that a moratorium on the

production and transfer of small arms was under discussion by the parties in the region, that a better network of information sharing among police, customs officials and border patrols — a kind of regional register— was being encouraged and that cooperation from the supply side was also being explored.

13. The Board welcomed the pioneering work being done in the region. In its opinion, the United Nations was proving itself an important facilitator of cooperation among the regional partners in West Africa and between the region and arms suppliers, and was playing a key role in exploring the applicability of that approach to other regions.

4. Anti-personnel landmines

14. The Board considered that the United Nations had a vital role to play in preventing and reducing the proliferation of anti-personnel landmines. It took note of the efforts under way to prevent proliferation by strict compliance with and wider adherence to the amended Protocol II of the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects. Most members of the Board regarded the parallel efforts of the Ottawa Process (see A/C.1/51/10, annex) and the Conference on Disarmament as complementary: the Ottawa Process sustained the urgency of the issue, but the objective of universality would not be achieved without the involvement of the Conference on Disarmament.[1]

15. A convention on the prohibition of the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines is to be negotiated at a diplomatic conference to be held at Oslo from 1 to 19 September 1997, and signed at Ottawa between 2 and 4 December 1997. The Board noted that in the envisaged Ottawa agreement the Secretary-General and the United Nations would be expected to play several roles, not only serving as depositary, but also having some responsibility for the future convention's implementation, including making existing minefields safe and reducing land mine inventories.

16. The Board strongly welcomed the efforts already under way to reduce and eliminate such weapons and the significant role played by the United Nations in mine clearance and mine awareness in the context of peace operations.

17. Some Board members felt the stress on efforts to conclude a total ban on anti-personnel landmines tended to minimize the importance of the agreement reached under the amended Protocol II, as well as the overwhelming importance of the need to focus international and United Nations efforts on the humanitarian aspects of the issue and their financing.

D. Weapons of mass destruction

18. Most Board members were of the view that activities related to implementation, transparency, compliance and verification of already existing regimes in the field of weapons of mass destruction would acquire greater importance in the coming years. They recalled that the Security Council, at its historic meeting at the level of Heads of State or Government in January 1992, expressed its commitment to take concrete steps to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in the area of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation.

19. That, however, did not diminish the strong support of Board members for promoting the creation of new norms relating to weapons of mass destruction, efforts which were complementary to the implementation of existing norms. It remained convinced that the negotiation of agreements to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, should still command the highest attention and the strongest efforts of the international community. Concerns were expressed about the need to continue to seek a reliable verification regime to tackle the growing dangers of biological weapons owing to rapid advances in scientific research.

20. The Board recognized that the Secretary-General and the United Nations would continue to play an important role in both norm-making and implementation of agreements relating to weapons of mass destruction. The Board noted that the primary responsibility for implementation of agreements lay with the bodies established by those agreements to perform those tasks, but that the United Nations could oversee the smooth functioning of those regimes and ensure the effective coordination of their activities.

21. The Board highlighted the specific responsibilities assigned to the United Nations in the case of serious non-compliance with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, as well as in the International Atomic Energy Agency/Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons safeguards agreements. It noted that another instance of United Nations activity in the field was the work of the United Nations Special Commission, which could be regarded as the first case of enforced post-conflict arms control and disarmament in United Nations history.

II. Meeting with representatives of non-governmental organizations

22. As it has done in the past, the Board met with representatives of the NGO Committee on Disarmament (New York). They addressed the next steps in nuclear disarmament, reducing conventional arms and armed conflict, access of non-governmental organizations to the First Committee and the Disarmament Commission under the new structure for servicing those meetings and reform of the disarmament sector of the Organization.

23. They circulated several documents, including proposals for a model United Nations treaty to ban nuclear weapons and a comprehensive treaty on conventional arms.

24. Some members of the Board applauded the important contribution of the non-governmental sector in having sustained political support at a high pitch for the finalization of the nuclear-test-ban treaty and in continuing to sustain the momentum towards a total ban on anti-personnel landmines.

III. Composition, role and future work of the Advisory Board

25. The terms of many of the members of the Board had expired since its last session in July 1996. I wish to commend the retired members for their invaluable contribution to the work of the Board. I welcomed the new members who participated in the twenty-ninth session. (See annex for list of Board members and participants in the twenty-ninth session.)

26. As the members of the Board are chosen in their individual capacities and not as representatives of States, they are placed in a unique position in the United Nations disarmament system. Individual members thus may offer independent advice to the Secretary-General, while ensuring that the realities of the diplomatic and security world are taken fully into consideration in the deliberations of the Board. Thus the Board can advise me openly and independently on all matters related to disarmament under my authority.

27. At future sessions, the Board plans to continue its deliberations on weapons of mass destruction and on conventional armaments, particularly practical measures of disarmament, including anti-personnel landmines. It shall keep under review the situation with respect to the convening of the fourth special session of the General Assembly on disarmament. In addition, it was suggested that the Board's future work could focus on the growing importance of new technologies developed in the commercial sector and their possible applications to weapons (dual-use technologies), the commercial use of satellite imaging and its military implications and the burgeoning cost of disarmament (safe dismantlement of weapons and implementation and verification of arms agreements). In that regard, a suggestion was made that UNIDIR prepare appropriate papers on the last three topics as a possible additional way to focus the work of the Board.

28. For reasons of continuity, the Board recommended that it meet at least twice a year. The Secretary-General has also proposed two sessions a year for the next biennium (A/52/6 (Sect. 2), para. 2.128 (a) (viii) (b)). Further, underlining the importance of its role as Board of Trustees of UNIDIR, it suggested that, in order to meet with the incoming Director of UNIDIR as early as possible,[2] the next session take place sometime in December 1997 or in January 1998.

Notes

[1] On 26 June 1997, the Conference on Disarmament appointed a Special Coordinator to conduct consultations on a possible mandate on the question of anti-personnel landmines (CD/1466).

[2] Upon the unanimous recommendation of the Board of Trustees of UNIDIR, the Secretary-General appointed Ms. Patricia Lewis as the Director of the Institute. She will assume her position on 13 October 1997.

Annex

Members of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters

Mr. Munir AKRAM[a]
Ambassador and Permanent Representative of
Pakistan to the United Nations Office at Geneva
Geneva

Mr. Serge Raymond BALE
Ambassador
Under-Secretary-General
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo

Mr. Hanan BAR-ON[a]
Ambassador
Senior Adviser to the President
Weizmann Institute of Science
Rehovot, Israel

Mr. Ashton B. CARTER
Ford Foundation
Professor of Science and International Affairs
Harvard University
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Ms. Thérèse DELPECH[a]
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Col. Tshinga Judge DUBE (Ret.)[a]
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Mr. Josef HOLIK[a]
Ambassador
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Mr. Celso LAFER[a]
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Ex officio

Ms. Patricia LEWIS (as from 13 October 1997)
Director
United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
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Mr. Christophe CARLE[a]
Deputy Director
United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
Geneva

Notes

[a] Participated in the twenty-ninth session, 10-13 June 1997.